Friday Dinner

by

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Abstract

Friday Dinner is a dance performance interlacing the aesthetics of both trained technical movements often taught in institutions, and gestural movements true and natural to a dancer's body. As a dancer trained in several codified forms, I am interested in the expressive range of patterns we absorb from formal practice, and the gestures and movement we manifest in our everyday lives. Using videotaped footage of dancers enjoying dinner, exchanging casual conversations and sharing childhood memories, we extracted natural gestural movement from the dancer's bodies. These idiosyncratic gestures were then layered with refined, established dance movement often found in dance institutions and academia. Heavily relying on recorded dinner settings and interviews, the work unravels a complexity of movement and virtuosity of presence, highlighting the aesthetics of both approaches while offering potential hybrids between these forms for contemporary performance.

Keywords: gestures; codified technique; dance training; idiosyncratic movement

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Defence Statement

Where it all began; my obsession

As a dancer trained in modern and contemporary techniques, I have always enjoyed performing movement that required the body to create specific shapes, lines, and forms. Throughout my earlier training in Japan, the emphasis of both training and performance were mostly placed on perfecting visual presentation. The more shapes and lines uniformed and synced with other dancers, the higher the *battements and grand jetés*, the more *pirouettes*, the better. I believe that the expectation of this inclined uniformity is somewhat driven by its cultural pressurization of the virtue of blending with the vast majority, the idea of collectivism deeply rooted within Japanese culture. To accommodate this expectation but still generating unique movement, I started interweaving bits of everyday hand gestures and body language into my choreography. Back home, sharing this choreography amongst other bodies was relatively straightforward, as we shared similar cultural customs, values and upbringings. In other words, the specific gestures I was working with seemed to come naturally to dancers who were also from Japan.

The translation of these same gestures was not as successful whilst participating in the University of North Carolina, School of the Contemporary Arts' (UNCSA) Winter Intensive as I began to realize the complexity of culturaly specific and learned movement patterns. The re-creation of *Femme Façade* (2014), a work of mine originally created and performed in Japan, with students in UNCSA led to the discovery that some of the choreography was not sinking into the dancer's bodies as organically as others. The Caucasian female dancers were fast to pick up codified movements such as jumps, turns and steps, however struggled to embody the more complex gestural movement stemming from Japanese culture interlaced with these dance techniques. This experience revealed a strong connection between culture and the embodiment of movement patterns.

Relocating to Vancouver, I notice the much different approaches taken towards education in dance institutions and academia compared to my experience in Japan. While most post-secondary degrees in dance still place significant value on codified techniques, there have also been numerous approaches in dance training emerging

within the city for the past few decades. Here, there seems to be more of a focus toward incorporating movement true and natural to each body, such as various release techniques bringing focus to the body's anatomy, breath, gravity and weight. Techniques such as Gaga, which has gained international recognition is an example of a technique where dancers explore movement while maintaining external and internal awareness of the body. Although some level of codified technique still exists in these forms, they have different priorities, moving away from certain shapes and lines for bodies to create.

My practice is deeply connected to both modes. I have great respect toward modern techniques which I consider a foundation of my training. My primary years of training were dedicated to modern dance, however I also admire the more gestural, post-modern approaches to movement. As an artist with a choreographic appreciation for both movement aesthetics, my obsession is to understand more about a dancer's relationship with codified techniques alongside idiosyncratic, gestural movements. *What is the uniqueness of each of these two types of movement? Why am I attracted to their integration? How can I create a work where these two types of movement intertwine without diminishing the authenticity of the performer?* These questions led to the creation of my MFA graduating work.

Works leading to *Friday Dinner*

Evening rain (2018), a collaborative work as part of the MFA studio course with artists Jennifer Tham and Hannah Campbell was an experimental project to visualize sound into predominantly gestural movement, questioning *how can we "see" sound as bodily movement, and how does the human body react to everyday sounds*? By examining pre-recorded rain sounds and observing a motion picture of Campbell's hand-drawn water droplets, we accumulated bodily movement associated with rain, water, mist and puddles. In this collaborative process, I was drawn to how each collaborator had distinct ideas of gestural movements accompanying a simple image of rain. Campbell, born and raised in Vancouver, shared a gestural sequence covering her head with a hood, trotting lightly with a moderately bent back to avoid her face from the shower. I came up with two gestures, after realizing that my body movement tended to change depending on location. They were movements I associated with walking in rain in two different cities I have lived in; Cincinnati, USA and Osaka, Japan. Similarly, Tham, a Singapore native who immigrated to Vancouver had an akin experience, where she

reflected herself moving differently in the cities of Singapore and Vancouver on a wet, damp day. *Evening Rain* led to developing a further interest in how space and place affect human movement, and how social choreography, a theoretical approach proposed by Andrew Hewitt could be incorporated into performance.

Figure 1. ***Evening Rain*****, 2018**

The Spring Show work *yane ura* (2019) encompassed both gestural and codified movement in the choreography, however, not in an ideal cohesive-hybrid form. Focusing on personal experiences of attachment, sentiment, and displacement in relationship to commodities and material objects, the work consisted of three large sections, inviting domestic objects into the performance space. The dancers explored movement through different modes of emotional and physical connectivity with the objects. While movement in the first two sections were quite gestural and literal, the third section leapt into codified dance techniques, leading to a lack of cohesive bridging between the two movement qualities and energies.

From these experiences, the objective for my graduating work was to find a hybrid choreography method to combine both codified and natural human gestures. The obsession for combining these two modes of movement stems from my dance training background in Japan where unity was preferred and as much as I enjoyed the aesthetic, I felt as though my individuality was diminished. I actively scraped off the movements that I had habitually formed to look like every other dancer onstage, and according to Deidre Sklar, this is not an uncommon experience. She mentions some of her students

realize they have been tamed by technique classes, their bodies transforming “as objects for public display” (86). As the role of a choreographer, my intent was to enable dancers freedom in their movement and to further understand how codified forms can be personalized in contemporary performance.

I am also constantly looking for ways to further connect with the audience through my works. There have been long debates about whether dance can be a language on its own. Sally Ann Ness proposes that dance is often cast “as the ‘nonverbal’ medium of communication”, positioned as an “inferior medium” (7). My understanding is that dance is a vehicle of communication and expression in a more open matter compared to verbal or textual communication. Though at times challenging to deliver precise ideas directly to the audience, dance can provide space for spectators to interpret and make meanings of their own.

During a work-in-progress showing of *Friday Dinner* through a residency at The Massey Theatre, we received feedback from an audience member stating he had felt a stronger connection to the work because of the choregraphy being familiar to movement he sees in his household. Describing the work as an “art imitating life”, he expressed his appreciation towards the familiarity of movement while incorporating “dance skills we all want to see”. Other spectators, two elderly women, expressed while they enjoyed smaller gestural movement, they “wanted to see more dancing”. Perhaps these individualized choreographies could allow the audience to feel more intimate, personal connections with codified movement and form, enabling more accessible connection to contemporary dance performances. The residency also surfaced my desire in finding the perfect ratio balance between these two techniques in choreography.

Figure 2. **Dancer Kevin Locsin during a residency showing at The Massey Theatre, 2020**

Theoretical Frameworks and Inspirational Figures

Many theoretical frameworks were considered during the creation of *Friday Dinner*, each offering new lenses to view and analyze the work. To begin, I start with Erin Manning's prominent theory of the minor gesture.

Manning invites us to challenge our rational understanding of embodiment, perception, and action by looking into the politics of art through minor and major gestures. According to Manning, major gesture is a movement form that can easily be recognized (19). During my initial research in 2019, I had suggested dance movement with established forms are notions of the major. Conversely, the gestural, idiosyncratic micro-movements are the minor; the types of movement that have tendency to be "backgrounded" in contemporary dance performances, to borrow her words.

Throughout the creation process, I have constantly been aware of Manning's idea that the minor is a continual variation on experience, not controlled by preexisting structure, but open to flux (1). This inspired parts of the work, both movement and sound, to be entirely improvisational. The core major structure enabled new spaces and frames for the dancers and sound artist to playfully insert the minor. Manning also suggests that despite the ways the grand gesture overshadows the minor, minor

gestures nonetheless course through all events; the challenge is to invent techniques that resist immediate capture by the major (66). This proposes there are variations even within major dance techniques. Perhaps a dancer performing codified techniques can still contribute their own minor, habitual movement patterns, if the choreographer allows.

Another theory which supported the framing of the work was focused on space and architecture. In *Moving Together, 22 Ways*, Justine A. Chambers and Alana Gerecke examine how choreographic invitations are found in architectural structures. Also describing them as social choreographies, they argue these everyday movements found in our daily livelihoods “contain a set of emphatic gestures that gather bodies in space”, a way of knowing the place (37). The term “social choreography” stems from Andrew Hewitt’s theory of perceiving the human body as a medium, reflecting social relations and experiences. Inspired by the idea of movement morphing and reforming based on placement (37), some of the choreography was set through revisiting the dancer’s childhood home. This provided directionality in spatial composition as well as movement quality, and informed the decision of eating at a dining table.

Placing thought in to the means of gesture as well as established dance movement were also vital in this research. To create work hyberdizing both forms of technique, I needed to further understand what gestures were, the purpose they served, and how they developed in different bodies and cultures. Prior to this research I had never put much thought into what gestures were. As an indivudual using English as a second language, I have always seen gesture as support, as bodily movement to fill gaps in verbal communication. The more choked I became with words, the more movement my body produced. Carrie Noland reminds us that gestures can be intentional or involuntary, crafted or spontaneous (6), which led to my decision to leave parts of the choreography improvisational for sincere, authentic gestures to emerge as an organic form but others to be crafted and rehearsed.

This work also led to researching the means of established dance techniques by exploring each dancer’s relationship with dance training. Oftentimes in dance institutions we are trained to create certain shapes and forms with our body. Although in most cases we are encouraged to modify these shapes to fit our own body, there are still certain rules and expectations to fulfill. Sklar describes ballet, a form of dance widely accepted and known in western culture as a genre emphatically privileging visual display and a set

of detailed formal and aesthetic conventions concerning spectacles of shape (88). I believe Sklar's stance on ballet is prominent in modern dance techniques.

In the interviews with my dancers, we discussed the significance of Ballet, Cunningham, and Graham during their training, as well as the meaning they extracted from these well established dance techniques. Dancer Shion Carter described these techniques as the foundation of her movement, the basis to which she would later "go off" in her own direction. Without this training, she expressed it would have been difficult to realize what her preferences were while developing her dance career. Brett Palaschuk, who had been trained for years in ballet shared her ability to reject certain movement aesthetics because of her rigorous training, as she states below:

> I think even being able to reject a technique or an idea (of movement) is very powerful…I mean, there's so many ways how you can throw something out the window. So, now I find myself either rejecting aspects of it, or incorporating these parts. And as I find myself sinking into these places (certain shapes and forms), when I'm dancing now and if I hit something (shapes and forms) all of a sudden, I sink into that previous body. If I hadn't been pushed or if I hadn't been forced to, then I wouldn't have found those places. (Palaschuk)

Although each dancer had different levels of attachments to these dance techniques, they all expressed a common opinion that the techniques serve as a foundation as a dancer. Some dancers, like Kevin Locsin, who has an intense background in Hip Hop styles, found certain techniques did not quite fit their bodies. Nonetheless, they found ways to modify and accommodate the movement to their physiques. They all seemed to have found value through codified dance training, whether they enjoyed the techniques or not. For my collaborators, these techniques stand as a grounding point where they can choose to reject, accept or find new ways to adapt these forms into new movement ideas. Here I would like to reference Johnathan Burrows' idea of technique;

> The aesthetic agendas held within our bodies from a lifetime of training create parameters that both enable and limit our ability to imagine what might also be possible. (Burrows, 67)

If technique could both enable and limit our potential as dancers, we must find new approaches to innovate our field of work. Through creation, we constantly searched for ways to encourage these enabling effects by looking at the possiblities through the inclusion of other movement patterns personal to each body. This created an effect on

codified forms as not only perfected shapes and forms, but as movement that reflect our individualized lived experience as well.

Choreographer Robert Wechsler's concepts and philosophies around his on-going work *1000 gestures* have been a great artistic inspiration towards the making of *Friday Dinner*. In his task-based work, Wechsler accumulated gestures he had found in everyday lives over the span of a decade. Furthermore, he found dancers to perform a thousand of these gestures in non-stop unison. Conveying his work as a "spectrum of morphological life", he places emphasis on the form of gestural movements instead of the meanings behind. His stance on leaving behind gestural meanings inspired me to also focus not so much on *why* we chose certain movement, but rather on the intricacy of movement itself. The notion of leaving meaning behind also supported my decision for sections of the improvised conversation to be fluid and unsettled. For my performance piece, the context of the conversation and signifiance of the gestures were not that important; like Wechsler, I became drawn to the quality and complexity of movement on its own. Another project that has inspired my work is Ann Carlson's *The Symphonic Body*. Created entirely from gestures, she underwent the process of observing and interviewing her performers, collecting gestural movements and mutating them into a dance work. Both choreographers utilize found choreography in everyday lives as their main movement language. While Carlson's work fueled inspiration for gesture-focused movement and compositional choices, Wechsler's idea helped support the interweaving of gestural and technical dance movement into a fluid, expressive form.

Creative process of *Friday Dinner*

Figure 3. Promotional image for *Friday Dinner,* taken by Sam Mason

Creation began in February 2020 by interviewing the four dancers and Brett Palaschuk. Initially, the work was not intended to be set around a dinner table. Instead of placing a 26” x 13” enormous table centerstage, the work was supposed to be set-free, dancers maneuvering freely around the performative space. The pandemic shifted the work in many ways, often creating challenges leading to new artistic choices.

From mid-February to September, my team transitioned to an online rehearsal to accommodate pandemic safety procedures. During quarantine, my only passion and consistent reason to get out of bed was to eat. Living alone, I spent hours eating a single meal. I would eat a bite, wiggle around in my chair, reach for my phone, cross my legs, eat a bite, spread my legs, sigh, lean on the backrest, scratch my head, touch my nose, eat a bite, sigh, sip tea, eat a bite. As this continued for weeks, I became increasingly aware of these micro movements throughout my body. Prior to this, I have always associated eating gestures as something like; reaching for a glass, cutting food with knife, wiping a mouth with a napkin. Though these more obvious movements are categorized as gestures as well, the hour-long meals helped trace the more intricate movements my body unconsciously executed. Following this realization, I asked my dancers to film themselves eating; one focusing on the upper body and one on the feet. The videos were fascinating, as it revealed even their feet having distinct uniqueness on

how they were placed and moved. They had different frequencies on when they would shift between one posture to another. Some would curl their toes; others would curl their ankles. Some would constantly be moving their legs, while others barely did. This discovery marked a pivotal turning point in my work, as it supported the shift to Covid-friendly work, not because of the pandemic circumstances, but driven solely by artistic curiosity. I decided to create the entire work over a dinner setting, while respecting the individuality of each body's differences, influenced by their upbringing, habit, cultural association, and dance training.

Friday Dinner largely consists of three sections;

I. Eating food and chatting; highlighting naturally emerged idiosyncratic movement

II. Sharing anecdotes; combining gestures with codified movement

III. Performing choreographed gestural sequences and codified techniques

In the first section, dancers are seen eating their desired choice of food from different cultures. Variety in food choices allowed the unique eating habits and manners from diverse cuisines to emerge. For example, techniques used to eat a falafel with a knife and fork highlighted different movement compared to one using chopsticks for sushi. Some cuisines would not even require any man-made tools to eat, resulting in changes to how dancers would sit and situate their weight on their chairs. As dancers ate, they also carried conversations on random topics. Sound in this section was improvised by the composer, also present at the table. Setting microphones in front of each dancer, we recorded sounds of dancers eating and talking, which was processed through the composer's interface and computer. She would tweak the recorded texts and surfaced sounds, such as cutlery and glasses clinking to incorporate them into her pre-composed music structure. Because this section was largely influenced by Noland's ideas of gestures being communal amongst cultures yet individual between bodies, there was no existing script. The improvised sound also became movement cues for dancers, creating additional layers of uniqueness to each performance.

The second section was less improvised, with emphasis toward weaving codified dance movement and gestures extracted from recorded interviews. Using recorded speech of dancers describing their relationship to dance training and childhood

memories, this section became a collage of fragmented stories and movement. Thus, this section also explored the various modes of human movement tied into spatial architectures. By asking each dancer to revisit childhood domestic spaces in their memories, we retrieved sincere movement interlaced with these spaces. For example, Carter, who was born in Japan and relocated to Vancouver during her primary years, recalled growing up in her *oba-chan's* (grandmother) house located in a tiny village in Mie prefecture. In the interview she shared how low everything in the house was built: the kitchen counter, the dining table, the stove top. Carter particularly recollected a body memory associated to a rice dispenser located in the kitchen.

> It's a specific rice holder… in the wall. And you press a button and it like, slants out like this, and it's like a bucket, a bucket of basically rice. And I was scooping it out and I spilled it everywhere. So then I'm swiping on the floor trying to clean up, but then I'm realizing looking back, everything is, nothing goes above this level in that experience. So maybe that's how the architecture might've influenced even me, now, because I like to be on the floor a lot. (Carter)

Repositioning her body into a *seiza* position with bent knees on the floor, Carter began to demonstrate how she would collect the spilled rice. Her upper-body weight was dexterously supported by her arms and hands to move around the floor, her pelvis staying close to the ground. She would then slide her hands along the floor, palms slightly cupped, slithering on her knees to make sure she had collected all the rice. She would maneuver around the ground in a peculiar yet natural way, presumably because of her childhood living in a house that required low, grounded movements. If these idiosyncratic movements were the product of her body's social and cultural environment, then perhaps, as Carter suggested, environment can deeply influence how a dancer moves throughout their career.

Sally Ann Ness decribes this phenomenon as an inscription of gesture. Stating the dancer's body as a "form of the 'host material', a living tissue" (6), she suggests how repeated gestural routines leave imprints on the body. Ness further studies how the "anatomy provides the 'sites' or 'places' where gesture can leave its mark in the rendering of a 'Wnal form'—that is, in a structure that bears an enduring and permanent signifying character" (6). In the interview Carter mentioned her preference of dancing closer to the floor. If gestures are inscripted into a body and leave certain imprints, it is conceivable that, as she proposed, a dancer's body and movement quality is molded by environmental factors. Upon reflection, I questioned whether there are specific social

and cultural environments ideal for one to cultivate certain kinesthetic awareness and movement patterns to become a successful professional dancer.

The last section was an assemblage of gestures collected from the dancer's memories associated with movement at a dinner setting. Gathering this collective knowledge, we generated a personalized score for each dancer. Though this section was a compilation of gestures, the quality of movement was unlike those found in the first section. When dancers were asked to come up with gestures associated at a dinner table, there was a tendency to come up with movements directly embodied by the idea of eating. Examples of gestures emerged from this exercise were: moving a cup from right to left, cutting salmon, and placing napkins on the knee. Conversely, although the first section had similar movements, it also visulized abstracted gestures that did not necessarily serve a direct purpose. This included some gestures such as: shifting body weight on the chair, touching of the face, and slouching back on the chair.

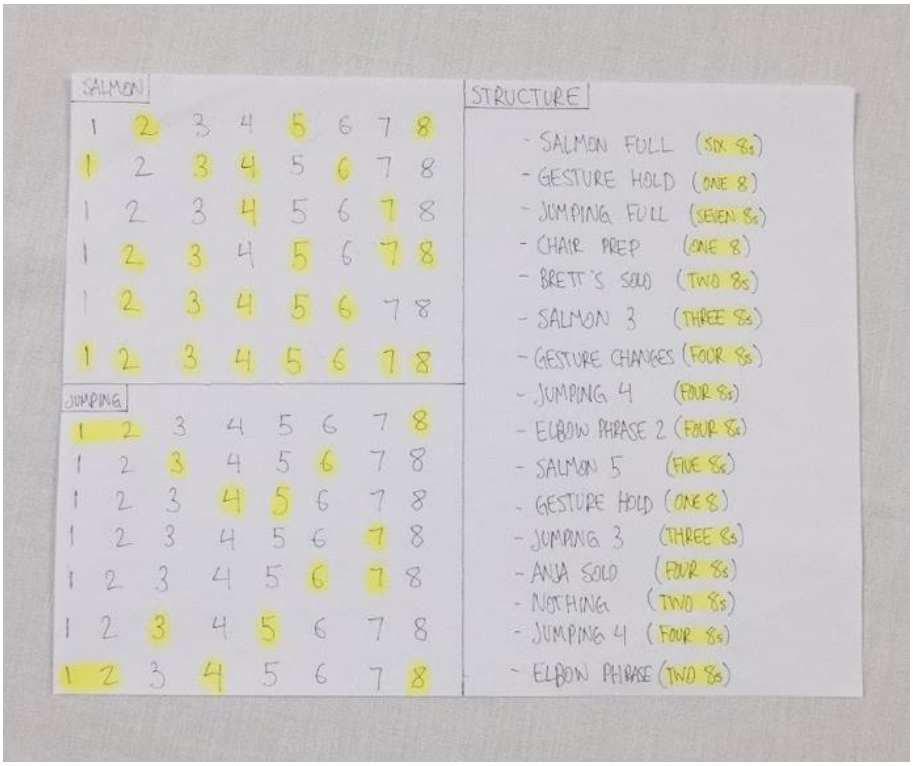

Figure 4. Kevin Locsin's score for the third section, taken by Xinyue Liu

Post-production; Reflections, Thoughts and Questions

Following a virtual showing of the pre-recorded performance of *Friday Dinner*, I held a small Q&A session to further elaborate and gain deeper understanding of the work. I took on the challenge of hosting this as a bilingual event and again realized the inseperatable relationship between gesture and language. Viewing myself through the tiny box on the Zoom Meeting Call, I noticed my gestures clearly changing depending on the language I spoke; English allowed my body to be more fluid and expressive, with movement embodying and supporting the content of my words. Japanese enabled my body to be more contained and stationary, movement concentrated in the upper torso and head area. Gestures were used to show respect toward the audience and less relational to the discussion. What came immediately to mind was the research Sklar mentions in her writing, conducted by anthropologist David Efron of the correlation between race and gesture. Refering to Efron's uncoverings of how race can affect pattern, tempo, and quality in conversational gestures, his suggestion of how the "mind" is as much a matter of kinesthetic as of verbal or visual organization (100), Sklar asks the following question:

> What if, then, we conceptualize "thinking" in different cultural communities as different genres of "choreographic" improvisation whose structural rules migrate, organizing and re- organizing sensory modalities, formal elements, and vitality affects? (101)

This concept was not considered during the making of the work, but like social and cultural environment affecting and inscribing the body, the same can be seen with thinking and language in the work. While the first section of *Friday Dinner* revealed each dancer's way of thinking through embodied movement with the English language, I am further interested in how a multilingual speaker's body correlates to the execution of gestures. *Will there entirely be a shift in movement quality like myself? Or do some people find a middle-point, combining elements from both languages?* By inviting diverse language-speakers as future collaborators, I am curious in finding new qualities and patterns of movement within the piece.

Since the release of the film, I have had multiple viewers reach out to discuss the accessibility of the work. While trained dancers expressed their appreciation towards the balance between organic gestures and synchronized codified movement, I also received feedback from multiple non-dancers stating the movement material starting with the

pedestrian-like and everyday allowed themselves to stay engaged and feel connected to the work without feeling alienated and left out. Thinking about the accessibility of dance work is always challenging as a choreographer, especially when there is a specific group of audience the work is intended for. As an emerging artist, I strive to create work that will not only be enjoyed by fellow artists, but by the broader community as well.

Reflecting on the process, perhaps one the biggest challenges in developing the work was trying to preserve the authenticity of gestural movement. Once it found place in the choreography and dancers began rehearsing, it started to lose some of its original quality. Terrified of the idea that the originality was becoming diminished through rehearsal, we tried different approaches to maintain the freshness but it was not very successful in some sections. Improvised sections were of course always real and raw, and I have learned to embrace the difference. Johnathan Burrows expresses the phenomenon of the dancer's movement mastery perfectly;

> the body of the dancer has mastered it, and its original extraordinariness – which came from the impossibility – has been replaced by an ordinariness of ease. Your piece of driftwood has been sandpapered (70).

I am intrigued by the idea that there is nothing wrong with sandpapered movement; it is simply a different set of aesthetics and beautiful on its own way. *Friday Dinner* is a hybrid work of not only codified and gestural movement, but also a combination of rehearsed and improvised movement. I enjoy movement of all kinds and this work enabled the experimentation with these multiple approaches.

However, I still grapple with the meaning behind Brian Postalian's role in the work. His black-costumed character inspired by a *kuroko*, a stagehand in Japanese traditional theatre, was intended to blend in to the background as a supporting role; however, his character instead became a substantial part of the final performance. This was made evident by the reactions and questioned posed by the viewers of *Friday Dinner's* premier showing. He served as an initiator to the work, creating shifts in quality of the dancer's movement and form. The work opened with his gestural greeting and finished on his cue. If the original intent of his role was to allow for the fluid progression of the dancers while fading into the background, then I may need to minimize his impact to the performance. However, if I were to embrace the feedback and response received

from multiple viewers, I would need to refine his role to enhance the overall performance.

Sound artist Kimia Koochakzadeh-Yazdi's role in the performance is also in need of refinement. Also initially intended as a supporting role, her white costume was chosen to blend in with the table cloth hoping to bring more attention to the dancers wearing saturated, rich colours onstage. However as I reflect back, the movement and gestures produced during her live-editing are just as nuanced and complex as the other performers present at the dining table. Instead of trying to background her presence, I should have made an attempt to embrace her unique style of gestural, idiosyncratic movement in the performance.

As I find myself towards the conclusion of this programme, I am surprised of my findings throughout this journey. I had expected a great change in artistic preference and style, and instead, I was able to refine, polish and find deeper understanding of my own self as an artist. To conclude my defence statement, I would like to depart with a final question I hope approach in the next stage of this project. Throughout the duration of this production, my collaborators and I were constantly reminded of the shift in creating dance performances under intense social-distancing measures. Strict procedures often impacted how we nagivate through space to maintain a safe working environment. As dance artists trained to manifest the world through physical engagement, I am further interested in how these world-scaled events such as a pandemic, impact our movement choices and patterns. Specifically*, how will world-scaled events affect the direction of my research, where movement choices are derived directly from the way individual bodies manuever through the complexities of space, time, culture and environmentally changing events? Moreover, how will they impact the way contemporary performance manifests in codified techniques and gestures?*

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Appendix A.

Choreographing with two techniques; the Codified and the Empirical

1. Introduction

Our everyday lives are filled with movement. We walk to meet friends, hug to comfort and jump to express excitement. We also walk to think, hug to part ways and jump when surprised. Ben Spatz classifies the bodily knowledge listed above such as walking, hugging and jumping as “embodied practice”, which is “knowledge structured in the form of technique” (1). He draws from Marcel Mauss’ sense of *les techniques du corps* (techniques of the body) to suggest the idea of technique being transmissible and repeatable knowledge (ptd. in Spatz 32). Although adjustments within each technique is required due to differences in bodies, Spatz believes that the knowledge is capable of being shared across cultures due to relative similarities between bodies. Here I’d like to think about an embodied technique which many of us learn in our early stages of life - *walking*.

Walking seems to be a simple movement to describe. This is what my description of walking might look like:

Stepping forward on the heel of one foot.

Moving the weight towards the ball of that foot.

Shifting the weight toward the toes.

Pushing the foot away from the ground.

Repeating with other foot.

Though walking sounds like a relatively simple technique, if I were to describe how I walk or how the person I see from my classroom window is walking on the street, it suddenly becomes challenging. Why? Because each body walks differently. The subtle differences in walking between the bodies makes the technique more complicated than

simply walking. How someone on the busy streets of metropolitan Tokyo might walk would differ from how someone might walk across a small town in rural Ohio. How I would walk through the hallways on campus is different from how you would walk through the same space. And hopefully, the way I walk past a quiet hospital wing is not how I walk in my local grocery store. The way our bodies move through space is deeply influenced by the experiences and environment they have been immersed in. No other body can walk how I walk - my movement is a reflection of my lived experience. Your body also carries your own lived experience. Our movements can also be affected by how space is designed, how we are seen, our identities and how our bodies function. Jill Green mentions a type of pedagogy prevalent in higher dance education such as universities, mostly evident in ballet and modern technique classes (100). She draws from Michel Foucault's theory that the western prison system has moved away from physical torture and instead moved onto an institutional system that is more "humanly aware" (100). However, although the system may have become more sensitive, Green states that it has become more "hidden and reaches its end through a system of surveillance, supervision, training and correction" (100). She argues that ballet and modern dance training in higher education is another example of a practice that "requires subjects to be observed and corrected through the ritual of dance technique classes" (100). As trained dancers in a higher educational setting, our movements are not only affected by the surrounding environment, but they are also strictly disciplined to fit a certain style of technique.

If movement is an echo of experiences, what does this mean for me as a dancer and choreographer, when our work at times requires several bodies to move in unison with the same movements? Growing up as a dancer I have consistently been told to *own* choreography - to practice until the movement is mine. *Owning* choreography is the ability to absorb movement and make it exclusively your own by translating, complementing personal expressions and executing them as if the movement vocabulary came from within your body. Dance performance generally relies on the dancer's ability to perform and execute movement with certain qualities. The more dancers can *own* the choreography, the better it looks, communicates and connects with the audience.

However, what if there are certain movements we cannot own? If movement reflects someone's lived experience, how can we as dancers and choreographers

approach movement and translate it through our own bodies? As a dance artist creating work between two cultures, I am facing the challenges of navigating the individual versus the collective when it comes to the transmission of movement. Here I suggest that perhaps movement as an embodied technique could be categorized into two similar but separate techniques; one as codified technique and the other as empirical technique. The idea of a codified technique is embodied technique capable of transmission from one body to another and possibly designed to do so. Empirical technique on the contrary would be movement patterns emerging from the individual, from their own lived experiences. My purpose is to seek new ways in creating works by considering how we, as choreographers and dance artists, can transmit our ideas to other bodies using both qualities from codified systems and individual empirical techniques. By doing so, I hope to find a shift in my work by looking at new movement vocabularies and qualities within the choreography as well as finding ways to navigate through individual and collective embodied knowledge.

2. Codified and Empirical Technique

My work *Femme Façade* (2013) was meant to express the social pressures I experienced in Japanese society as an individual growing up in North American culture. Composition and choreography within the work were inspired by gestures native to Japanese culture. The original cast, which consisted of 14 female dancers immersed in Japanese society, could embody the movement naturally. However, when the piece was remounted in North Carolina in 2016, both the dancers and I quickly realized that certain movements were challenging for them to own compared to others. Caucasian female dancers unfamiliar with movement patterns and qualities specific to Japanese culture struggled to embody them. From this experience, I began to question the possibility of certain embodied techniques as more challenging to transmit between bodies compared to other techniques.

In his book “What a Body can do”, aforementioned Spatz suggests that an embodied technique is transmissible and repeatable knowledge facilitated by human embodiment (16). I propose the embodied technique Spatz refers to is similar to my understanding of movement as codified technique. My idea of codified technique is embodied technique capable of transmission from one body to another. It can cross between bodies, culture, gender and generations with the potential of being acquired by

any person with the right amount of practice. Walking would be an example of codified technique alongside movement such as driving, playing soccer and using a can opener. In dance, codified technique would be specific styles of dance established as technique and taught in studios, some of which include ballet, tango, Graham and Cunningham.

Contrarily, empirical technique is personal lived experience. The quality of how I walk and carry my body through the busy streets of Shibuya (e.g. standing straight, ignoring other pedestrians and catcallers but acknowledging they exist, fast paced, looking confident and focusing not to bump into people) would be the empirical technique, a unique skill specific for walking through the space. It can include the knowledge of necessary distance between other bodies, how the body should be presented and how it is navigated through space. In dance, empirical technique would be the insignificant but particular ways in how one might do their pliés, or the movements in-between learned shapes and sequences. It could also be how the dancers distribute their weight and how it shifts through the body. A certain type of audience might also affect how the dancers carry their body onstage. A Japanese audience is typically quiet throughout the entire performance, whereas in my experience I notice North American spectators are more vocal and expressive. This has definitely impacted my level of consciousness and performance and would qualify as empirical technique.

Being a dance artist, there seems to be a general assumption that movement can be passed along to different bodies and taught to everyone. However, here I suggest the embodied knowledge capable of transmission within a studio setting is typically codified technique. We can make an attempt to train different bodies to do *pirouettes* and *grand je tés*, though it is certainly not guaranteed for everyone to master the techniques. Some bodies would better absorb the movements and execute them than others. Nonetheless, during its long history, these codified dance techniques have been modified to become transmissible. Teachers and dancers have been able to break down movements for better, easier modes of transmission. Due to its modification, it should be easier to transmit compared to empirical techniques; someone's lived experience. The aforesaid dancers in North Carolina had difficulty learning certain sections of my choreography when the movements were heavily influenced by my lived experience.

Performer and ethnologist, Tomie Hahn, analyzed her experience and process of learning traditional Japanese dance in her book “Sensational knowledge; embodying culture through Japanese dance”. Hahn states conveying lived experience is challenging, because even “a clear and detailed description of even a simple experience is endless” (20). Below is an extract from Hahn’s writing which justifies how complicated empirical technique as lived experiences are:

> My point here is that conveying lived experience is challenging, particularly if it is a performance practice you “know” in your body but do not regularly transmit to someone else- either through demonstration or through writing (Hahn 20).

With practice, I presume codified technique could be shared with most bodies in a studio. Whereas empirical technique, or ‘lived experience’ would be challenging to do so and might require a different method. However, I would like to acknowledge that not all techniques shared in dance studios are strictly codified techniques. Nowadays, new hybrid types of dance training methods are emerging such as Gaga dance. Gaga is a new type of technique designed to expand one’s movement vocabulary by not only valuing the dancer’s trained physical abilities but rather encouraging them to access their lived experiences and combining the two. The class is guided through imagery and sensational tasks provided by the teacher while dancers are to find new ways of interweaving the codified techniques and empirical differences. The aim of this training is for dancers to focus more on sensation and qualities rather than only forms and shapes. By accessing ways to combine both techniques, the movement vocabulary emerging from this method seems to look rich and unique.

In “The minor gesture”, Erin Manning invites us to challenge our rational understanding of embodiment, perception and action by looking into the politics of art through minor and major gestures. Her idea of minor gesture has the potency to challenge the major by looking at alternative ways of perceiving the world. The major could be what is seen as common sense and wisdom, something that most people are already aware of. In order for new knowledge to emerge, Manning argues the need to look at the minor which intermittently possess hidden potentiality (66). Oftentimes in dance we have the tendency to value grand, established technique. In classes, the emphasis is usually put on dancers to move from one shape to another without paying much attention to the transition between the two shapes. Oftentimes, the ability to

embody certain dance techniques with precision is used as a measurement to see how good the person is as a dancer. Subtle movement as lived experience or those in-between tend to get erased, hidden or forgotten for the sake of unity and cleanliness.

Here I am speaking from my experience, coming from a culture which places more emphasis and value on the collective rather than the individual. Drawing from Manning's theory, my objective is to look at the empirical technique and lived experience in movement through her scope of a minor gesture. In the context of research-creation, she questions her readers to consider "how a practice is capable of opening up the field such that minor gestures can emerge, this despite the value placed on the more recognizable and predictable grand gestures" (66). As proposed earlier in the papers, the purpose of this research is to seek new ways in creating works by looking into what is normally seen as a 'minor gesture' in contemporary dance and consider how we, as choreographers and dance artists, can transmit our ideas to other bodies using both qualities from codified systems and individual empirical techniques. By accessing both forms in the choreographic work, I hope to bring more natural, lived experiences into the light through my work alongside grand traditional dance techniques.

3. Empirical technique- considering gender, class and space

As mentioned earlier, empirical technique could be composed of various different factors in life. Here I'd like to consider how gender, class and space might impact one's movement.

In "White boys dancing", Michael Ventura describes how middle-class white men lack the rock 'n' roll moves when they dance in the night clubs of Brooklyn. "They are singularly graceless", he states, "but many of the white women of the same class aren't. They move pretty good, on the whole, especially in comparison with their men. And the people who can really move are the street kids—poor whites and Latins as well as blacks—who invent the dances and keep them alive" (4). Ventura argues the common thread between middle-classed white women and a street kid is the primary awareness they have of their bodies (4). A female knows from experience that how she moves and what she puts on her body is how she is judged. Eventually she learns how to deal with the fact of being constantly watched and controls the messages her body will send (4).

Ventura continues to describe how a man's body is just as vulnerable on the streets as a women's body - he is aware of being seen (5). It is necessary for him to look threatening, to be performing additional technique for survival while in reality all he might be doing is simply walking. "At the extreme, your moves can get you killed or save your ass. And on the street, things can get extreme at any moment. You have to show the street, at all times, just how tough you are" (5).

These examples of how one might move and carry their body in certain places could be an empirical technique learned as someone coming from a specific class and gender. We are so accustomed to walking and carrying bodies in our everyday lives that we forget to realize how differently our bodies react and perform from one another.

Gender and class aren't the only influences that can affect movement. The space and architecture we are immersed in can immensely impact how our bodies are carried and maneuvered through space. I recollect how differently my body moves whilst walking through a crowded department store in Kobe, Japan where I am originally from versus strolling up and down the aisles of a small boutique store in a neighborhood I grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio. How I walk through the narrow, crowded streets of Kobe is also nowhere close to my pacing and moving patterns in western society. Our bodies absorb fragments of the environment we are surrounded by and adapt them into our movement without much consciousness.

Architect Dragana Perusinovic looks into the politics of spatial choreography in her paper "Choreography and Architecture; Composing a framework for individual participation." Acknowledging the meaning of choreography as an "act of composing patterns of movement for the human body", she suggests the composition of movement is not only seen in dance but also used to constitute architectural spaces (1). Similar to structures of movement patterns in dance, she asserts that "a sequence of architectural spaces can determine the movement of the human body" (1). In using rhythm and order, spatial choreography can create precision by "creating controlled navigation of spatial sequences." (8) Furthermore, she implies that continuously moving through the same space creates a specific habitual pattern (1). If spatial choreography has the potential of navigating precise human movement and thus creating habits, I would like to propose that this emerged habit is another form of empirical technique. As it is specific

knowledge to maneuver through a particular space and place, it is only known to bodies who have experienced it.

4. Lived experience in dance choreography

> Each person's account depends on that person's perspective, and is informed by past experiences, by enculturated sensual orientations. (Hahn, 20)

Throughout this essay I have been implying that each body has its own unique lived experience which embeds a technique in the body. How is this handled by other artists in the field of contemporary dance? Lliane Loots, a contemporary dancer and choreographer recognize that an adult body does not come into a studio as a "blank slate" (Loots, 380). Rather, she claims that they enter the space with "their own history written on their embodied self" (380). Working with dancers in her own collective; the Flatfoot Dance Company, Loots suggests their divergent race, class and physical ability might be narratives that are "lived and physically manifest" (Loots, 62). As a choreographer she acknowledges the possibility of denying these histories and aims to work for "corporeal constructions of a hypothetically impossible 'neutral body'" by disciplining her own history and narratives onto her dancer's bodies (Loots, 380). I question this type of method because of my beliefs that dancing bodies should be given enough space to be able to express its own roots and histories. Loots points out the idea of fully disciplining one's body has been present in the history of contemporary dance (380).

This reminds me of the experience I had as a dancer in Japan - the feeling as though my movements had to fit a certain 'cookie-cutter' of shapes. There were no spaces for additional movement. As indicated earlier, presumably this has to do with the Japanese culture of favoring collectives over individuals, uniform over variable- all bodies were required to move in the same way. We also had strict diet restrictions to encourage unified body size, shape and proportion. As a dancer I felt as though my body was replaceable; that it had no unique value and it was the same as any other body on stage. Inversely, Loots suggests we could look at these different bodies with histories and work from a place without control and discipline (Loots, 62). Instead she proposes to work from a place to create a dialog of personal storytelling (Loots, 380). I appreciate the shift in how contemporary dance is challenging itself these days, perhaps more so in

western cultures - by pushing against codified technique and instead putting more value on individual expression. How Loots is endorsing the field to allow more choreographic forms of personal storytelling could also suggest that she is looking for ways of unique individualities to be accepted.

Here, I feel the urgent need to supplement my statement of what I mean by my desire to 'push against codified systems'. My intention has never been to go against traditional dance techniques by any means. As a dancer I have been training in these techniques for years and believe there are reasons why ballet and modern dance techniques have higher status in the field of dance, as they have revolutionized the field and people have found value in those codified systems. As a choreographer, I too find significance in them and will continue to adapt these established techniques within my work. My point is that I am simply interested in how the field could further expand and develop if we were to adapt qualities from both empirical and codified techniques and appreciate the uniqueness and diversity of different bodies. Anthropologists Karin Eli and Rosie Kay describes the nature of dance as below;

> With dance being, quite literally, a practice, it involves the shaping and expressing of each dancer's habitus, a habitus molded through time and technique, somatic possibilities and experiential actualities. (Eli; Kay 63)

If dance truly is an artform reflecting ourselves, habits and society, I feel a strong urge to value the authenticity of movement we choose to express ourselves within the realm of dance. The codified traditional technique we see onstage is the end-result of the numerous amounts of time and effort put in by dancers. As audience members, these traditional techniques are aesthetically pleasing to watch- we admire and appreciate their commitment. However, as much as I value traditional dance techniques, I strongly believe that art is a reflection of who we are and is a way of sharing an individual's genuine experience and thoughts to the world. To share these authentic stories, I suggest we also must not forget to incorporate the empirical within our work.

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Appendix B.

Video Documentation

Choreographer: Tomoyo Yamada

Performers: Anja Graham, Charlotte Telfer-Wan, Kevin Locsin, Shion Carter, Brian Postalian

Videography: Sam Mason, Bianca Cheung

Sound: Kimia Koochakzadeh-Yazdi

Lighting: Hans Hsieh, Claudia Chan

Costume: Meagan Woods

Description:

A full video of *Friday Dinner*

File Name:

Friday Dinner - Final 2 - Vimeo - Nov-27-2020.mp4